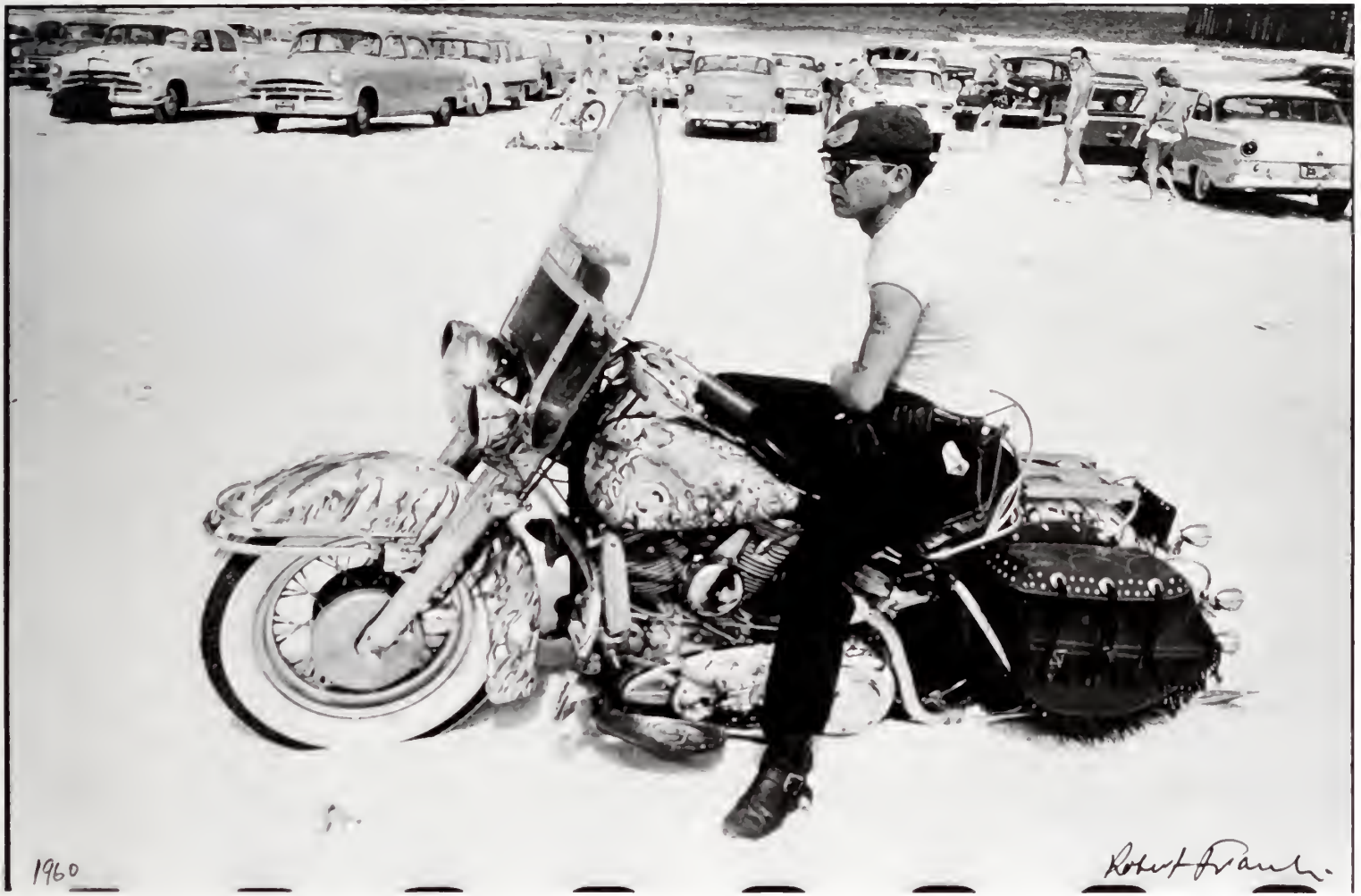
UNPOSED PORTRAITS



UNPOSED PORTRAITS

When photographic technology progressed to the stage of high-speed exposure, a new type of portraiture became possible. Previous portraits had, by necessity, been carefully composed and studied. With fractional-second exposures came the capacity to isolate moments out of the continuity of time that the human eye could not register. Just as Eadweard Muybridge's famous motion studies of a running horse recorded individual optical moments that could not be perceived under ordinary conditions, so too can the contemporary photographer freeze an evonescent fraction of time that otherwise would pass too quickly for full consciousness. The modern fast exposure can thus depict a spontaneity of human expression and environment virtually unknown in earlier works. In capitalizing on the unexpected detail and the ephemeral moment, photography thus allows for a type of portraiture unavailable in other media.

Unposed portraiture has roots in the earlier part of the twentieth century in the work of French artists such as Jacques Henri Lartigue, Brassaï, and Henri Cartier-Bresson, and American artists such as Walker Evans, Paul Strand, and Weegee. These photographers often sought out a background or environment which functioned formally as a composition and simultaneously strove to capture a spontaneous expression from the subject. This resulted in an elegant photograph which also conveyed o strong sense of unedited reality.

Although related to the trodition of documentary photojournalism by their utilizotion of transient events, unposed portraits differ significantly from snapshots and news photos. Rather than relying exclusively on fortuitous happenstance, they consider the totality of the picture by uniting both formal excellence and expressive content. Also unlike news photos and snapshots, these photographs reveal strong individual sensitivities ond distinctly personal visions.

The straightforward, factual approach presents an objective, albeit personal, description of our time. By virtue of the unselfconscious noture of both environment and people, these photogrophs become powerful sociol stotements os well as depictions of individual personalities. Whereas traditional portraiture focuses on an individual presence, these photogrophs copture o total social fabric in which spontaneity pervades every aspect of the image, and characteristics of the environment seem os ephemeral as the expressions of the subject. In revealing unconscious expressions and behavior, ond otherwise unnoticed juxtapositions, unposed portraits capture how we are, not how we want to be or think we are.

Barbara Haskell, Curator

CHECKLIST

All entries are black and white photographs, and all dimensions refer to image size.

MARK COHEN

Born in Wilkes-Barre, Pennsylvania, 1943. Lives in Wilkes-Borre.

Untitled, 1976, 16 x 20 inches. Courtesy of Castelli Graphics, New York.

Untitled (Bostan), 1976, 16 x 20 inches. Courtesy of Castelli Graphics, New York.

Untitled (Reeds Beach, New Jersey), 1976, 16 x 20 inches. Courtesy of Costelli Graphics, New York.

This lady/woman seems uncomfortable, 1976, 16 x 20 inches. Courtesy of Castelli Graphics, New York.

BRUCE DAVIDSON

Born in Chicago, 1933. Lives in New York City.

Dwarf, 1958, 9¼ x 13¾ inches. Lent by the artist.

Untitled, 1959, 6¾ x 10 inches. Lent by the artist.

Topless Restaurant, 1965, 13⅞ x 9 inches. Lent by the ortist.

Social Club, East 100th Street, 1966, 13 x 13 inches. Lent by the artist.

ROBERT FRANK

Born in Zurich, Switzerland, 1924. Lives in Nova Scotia, Canada.

Iowa City, 1955, 9¼ x 13½ inches. Courtesy of Light Gallery, New York.

Indianapolis, 1955, 9 x 13⅜ inches. Courtesy of Light Gallery, New York.

St. Petersburg, 1957, 11 x 13⅞ inches. The Museum of Modern Art, New York, Purchase, 1958.

Pablo, 1958, 9½ x 13¾ inches. The Museum of Modern Art, New York, Purchase, 1958.

Daytona Beach, 1960, 7½ x 11 inches. Courtesy of Light Gallery, New York.

LEE FRIEDLANDER

Born in Aberdeen, Washington, 1934. Lives in New City, New York.

New York City, 1963, 7⅛ x 10¼ inches. Courtesy of Light Gallery, New York.

New York City, 1963, 6½ x 9⅝ inches. Courtesy of Light Gallery, New York.

New Orleans, 1968, 7⅛ x 11⅜ inches. Courtesy of Light Gallery, New York.

San Francisco, California, 1970, 9⅛ x 6¼ inches. Courtesy of Light Gallery, New York.

Aspen, Colorado, 1972, 6¾ x 10¼ inches. Courtesy of Light Gallery, New York.

ANTHONY HERNANDEZ

Born in Los Angeles, 1947. Lives in Los Angeles.

London, 1971, 7⅞ x 11¼ inches. Lent by the artist.

Los Angeles, 1971, 8 x 11⅝ inches. Lent by the artist.

Los Angeles, 1972, 8 x 11⅝ inches. Lent by the artist.

Waikiki, 1975, 8 x 11⅝ inches. Lent by the artist.

DANNY LYON

Born in Brooklyn, 1942. Lives in Bernalillo, New Mexico.

Uptown, Chicago, 1965, 9 x 13⅝ inches. The Museum of Modern Art, New York, Purchase, 1969.

Ellis Prison, 1968, 11 x 14 inches. Courtesy of The Witkin Gallery, Inc., New York.

Texas Prison, 1968, 11 x 14 inches. Courtesy of The Witkin Gallery, Inc., New York.

Texas Prison, Ramsey Unit, 1968, 11 x 14 inches. Courtesy of The Witkin Gallery, Inc., New York.

Joselin, Colombia, 1972, 11 x 14 inches. Courtesy of The Witkin Gallery, Inc., New York.

DANUTA OTFINOWSKI

Born in Los Angeles, 1953. Lives in San Francisco.

Market Street, San Francisco, 1976, 8⅛ x 12¼ inches. Lent by the artist.

Market Street, San Francisco, 1976, 12½ x 8⅜ inches. Lent by the artist.

Tucson, Arizona, 1977, 8¼ x 12¼ inches. Lent by the artist.

Venice Beach, 1977, 8⅜ x 12½ inches. Lent by the artist.

GEOFF WINNINGHAM

Born in Jackson, Tennessee, 1943. Lives in Houston, Texas.

Mascaras finishes Tenaka with The Flying Body Press, 1971, 16 x 20 inches. Courtesy of The Witkin Gallery, Inc., New York.

Hank Snow, 1972, 12¼ x 18⅛ inches. Lent by the artist.

The Honorable John Tower, 1972, 11⅜ x 16¾ inches. Lent by the artist.

Texas Aggie Football Fan, 1976, 11⅜ x 16⅞ inches. Lent by the artist.

GARRY WINOGRAND

Born in New York City, 1928. Lives in Austin, Texas.

Untitled, n.d., 8⅞ x 13⅛ inches. Courtesy of Light Gallery, New York.

Untitled, n.d., 8¾ x 13⅛ inches. Courtesy of Light Gallery, New York.

Untitled, 1965, 8¾ x 13 inches. Courtesy of Light Gallery, New York.

Untitled, 1967, 13 x 8¾ inches. Courtesy of Light Gallery, New York.

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Whitney Museum of American Art
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Front cover: Robert Frank, Daytona Beach, 1960.
Inside left: Garry Winogrand, Untitled, n.d.
Inside right: Bruce Davidson, Dwarf, 1958.
Back cover: Lee Friedlander, New York, 1963.